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WFP AND THE YEAR 2000 (Y2K) PROBLEM

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NOTE TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

This document is submitted for information to the Executive Board.

Pursuant to the decisions taken on the methods of work by the Executive Board at its First Regular Session of 1996, the documentation prepared by the Secretariat for the Board has been kept brief and decision-oriented. The meetings of the Executive Board are to be conducted in a business-like manner, with increased dialogue and exchanges between delegations and the Secretariat. Efforts to promote these guiding principles will continue to be pursued by the Secretariat.

The Secretariat therefore invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document, to contact the WFP staff member(s) listed below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting. This procedure is designed to facilitate the Board's consideration of the document in the plenary.

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WFP AND THE YEAR 2000 (Y2K) PROBLEM

1.   The intention of this Information Note is to advise the Executive Board how the Programme is addressing the year 2000 (Y2K) problem. Information will be regularly updated and progress reported on WFP's Internet site, in line with the recommendation made by the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC).

The origin and scope of the Y2K problem

2.   Most computer systems store and refer to dates as six-digit numbers in the form **dd-mm-yy**. The year is referred to by the last two digits only. There is seldom any reference to the century. Thus, when we move from 1999 to 2000, the year element of dates will change from "99" to "00" and when calculations are performed using a two-digit year code, the results may range from the misleading to the disastrous. Many systems will assume that the "true" year is 1900. This will have obvious effects on any processing that is date dependent or calculations where dates are involved. If one considers how much information processing is date dependent, the effect of this change will be apparent.

3.   The Y2K problem is not limited to information technology systems but may potentially affect all systems with in-built date-sensitive processing chips in computer hardware, such as those systems that manage national power, gas and water supplies.

4.   International concern about the world's readiness for the year 2000 has grown to such an extent that the United Nations is urging Member Nations to act. Concerns were expressed at the G8 summit of leading industrial nations and the European Commission in June 1998. The concerns were that although most developed countries were taking action—albeit often through belated awareness campaigns that only started in 1998—little was happening in developing countries at that time.

What has WFP been doing to address the Y2K problem?

5.   A Year 2000 Task Force has been set up to address the Y2K problem and to offer guidance and assistance to headquarters and the field offices in preparing for the Y2K. The task force has developed a Y2K methodology for country offices based on the guidelines suggested by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its July 1998 session and the methodology adopted by the United Kingdom National Audit Office. The four phases of theY2K methodology consist of:

   a)   an awareness phase, educating management, staff and external agencies and suppliers;

   b)   an assessment phase, reviewing all areas that may be affected by Y2K;

   c)   an action planning phase, analyzing WFP's risk and preparing plans to take corrective action when possible; and

   d)   a contingency planning phase, to plan for those cases where WFP is unable to solve the problem.

6.   The initial focus of WFP (as in most organizations) has been on information technology—specifically computer hardware and software. The Programme recognizes that the Y2K is a business problem that has been caused by technology and has

established a Y2K Task Force focusing on the three key areas of concern—information technology, administrative services and operations. A management Focal Point has been assigned responsibility in each area, to ensure that the Y2K problem is addressed, not just within the organization but also externally.

7.   While WFP is confident that its computer systems will be Y2K compliant, the Programme does not exist in a vacuum—there are many external factors that will influence WFP's ability to function after 31 December 1999. The Y2K 'readiness' of external suppliers is being analyzed both at the field office and headquarters level, and plans are being made to address those instances where suppliers cannot certify their ability to function in the year 2000.

8.   In addition to its own Y2K project, WFP has been taking part in a series of meetings of the United Nations Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (CCAQ) looking at ways to address common Y2K issues across agencies in the field offices. As the recommendations from these meetings become effective, a common system-wide approach to developing contingency plans in the field offices will be followed. At the CCAQ meeting WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF were tasked with a complete review of the Y2K problem and its effects on United Nations logistical operations. A Working Group on United Nations Logistical Operations is being set up.

Progress made

9.   The Y2K Task Force was established to monitor the progress of Y2K activities within WFP and reports to the Administration Sub-Group of the Executive Staff chaired by the Deputy Executive Director. The Y2K Task Force has the following responsibilities:

- raise overall awareness within the organization

- develop an overall methodology to address the Y2K problem

- develop and distribute documents to all field offices

- facilitate communication throughout WFP regarding the year 2000

- liaise with other United Nations agencies on all Y2K issues

Awareness phase

10.   Late last year a briefing note to raise awareness of the Y2K problem and how it may affect the business of WFP was distributed to all Country Directors and telecommunications/information technology co-ordinators. Year 2000 awareness presentations have been given to field office and headquarters staff. The audience for the field office presentations has consisted of Regional Managers, Country Directors and Regional Finance and Administrative Officers. At headquarters, several presentations have been given to which all staff were invited.

Assessment phase

11.   Both the information technology and administrative focal areas have completed their assessment phase at headquarters. An Inventory Assessment Guide in the form of a Directive was distributed to all country offices in March, 1999 to assist them in assessing their Y2K situation.

Action plan phase

12.   Both the information technology and administrative focal areas are currently working on a headquarters action plan to ensure all WFP's computer systems and services are Y2K compliant.

13.   A Y2K–compliant laboratory for local area network (LAN) software and hardware will be set up in June to simulate the Y2K environment and test all LAN applications. Mainframe system software is currently being upgraded to be Y2K compliant with testing envisaged in mid-June.

14.   In order to assist country offices in developing and carrying out action plans to deal with Y2K problems prior to 2000, an Action Plan Guide was distributed to all such offices in April, 1999. Tasks in this phase include:

- documenting and prioritizing all country office activities

- matching activities to the Inventory Assessment

- analyzing the risk level

- creating a project plan

- carrying out the plan of action

15.   During this phase the Y2K Task Force will provide a Y2K toolkit to help country offices test their systems and correct some of the Y2K information technology problems.

Contingency plan phase

16.   The Contingency Plan Guide to assist country offices in developing and testing contingency plans is scheduled for distribution to all country offices in June, 1999. Contingency planning for headquarters has begun.

CONCLUSION

17.   The Y2K Task Force believes that WFP's systems both at headquarters and in the field will be Y2K compliant to the highest level possible, as will those of other United Nations sister agencies. WFP's expertise in contingency planning in its operations department will be used to address Y2K operational problems where necessary.